

Hunters, hunting rifles and muzzle brakes!

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Ron Thomson is probably one of the most experienced big game hunters of the 20th century. If you doubt this, read his books on big game hunting and decide for yourself – for more information go to www.ronthomsonshuntingbooks.co.za These books are the remarkable story of Ron's 24 year service as a game ranger in Rhodesia's (now Zimbabwe's) Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

The following is a *verbatim* excerpt (this story is published by SAHGCA with the kind permission of Ron Thomson) from his book "**Mahohboh**" (page 98 & 99) where Ron describes a real life hunting story about the disastrous effects of a muzzle blast on a fellow hunter in a close encounter with dangerous game.

"I have said (above) that modern muzzle-brakes reduce the recoil of heavy calibre weapons, and they do. Hunters should be warned, however, that there are some serious practical drawbacks to muzzle-brakes. Indeed, I feel so strongly about this that I would like to digress a bit and tell you another story.

I was hunting buffalo one day in the Tjolutjo teak forests. My companion hunter was Game Ranger John Coleman whose home stamping ground at that time was Victoria Falls. John had just purchased a new BSA .458 Magnum rifle with a muzzle-brake. It was the first muzzle-brake I had ever seen. Compared with some of today's devices it was very primitive. All it comprised were two sets of broad back-slanting slots which had been cut, five on each side, into the rifle's barrel just back from the muzzle. The purpose of the slots was to throw some of the expended gasses backward when the rifle was fired. In effect this pushed the rifle forward slightly – enough to counteract the otherwise heavy recoil.

I was very keen to 'feel' this device working. But first we had a job of work to do.

We were following five buffalo bulls. The undergrowth was very thick but the tracking was easy on the soft Kalahari sand. We had found the spoor on the road which ran along the Sehumi game fence. After much meandering about in the grassland the trackers led us out of the drainage line and up the slope into the teak. The tracks were several hours old – so the buffalo could have been miles away. On the other hand, they could have rested up anywhere just ahead of us. This meant we had to be on our toes all the time.

We came across the buffalo very suddenly. They were lying up in some regenerating teak scrub which virtually blanked out all lateral vision. There were no oxpeckers attending the animals so we were afforded no prior warning of the buffaloes' nearby presence. The first

thing we experienced was the surprised eruption of a dark black shape in the green shrubbery not ten yards ahead of us – and we heard the loud ‘whooshing’ sound of breath being expelled explosively from flared nostrils. And there, suddenly, standing almost within poking distance of our rifles, was a huge buffalo bull glaring at us along his high-flung nose. Behind him we were conscious of (rather than “saw”) other hairy black shapes scrambling to their feet. All this happened in the blink of an eye.

At that point John was slightly ahead of me and on my left hand side. He was close – his shoulder within touching distance. We could both see the buffalo quite clearly and we both reacted instantaneously and instinctively. In that flashing moment we both understood the buffalo was about to charge.

I took one step to the right, to give myself more space, and swung my rifle to my shoulder. John’s rifle erupted first ... and I caught the full blast of the gasses from his rifle’s muzzle-brake full in the face. My eyes, stung by the explosive impact, filled instantly with tears. And in that brief flash of time I was rendered totally blind.

Stunned – blind – and panicking – I dropped to my knees. I tried to see what was happening ahead of me. All I “saw” was a blazing white blur of light. I was conscious of the greenery and of John’s vague khaki form on my front left. And I heard the pounding hooves of the buffalo as it came straight at us in full charge.

I could not see the animal – not even a misty black shadow. I could not defend myself. I was terrified. I fell sideways to the ground and rolled away from John. Standing up I knew he would be the buffalo’s first target.

‘Baaahm’

There came the sound of a second shot – and the crashing shuddering impact of the buffalo’s body as it hit the ground. I looked up and stared into a fuzzy black face, and into two vacant black eyes, not three feet in front of my face.

My sight was coming back. I blinked madly to clear my vision and as my sight returned I noted the long bloody groove of the last bullet’s passage running backwards along the top of the buffalo’s nose. The furrow ended where the bullet had entered the skull on its way to the brain. In this distance I could hear the pounding feet of the other buffalo as they made good their escape.

I have always been very worried about muzzle-brakes since the experience and I tend to give my companion hunters their 'space' when I see muzzle-brakes on their rifles. All it takes is one such bad experience."